7 Steps to an Ethical Data Science Startup

Tech journalist Kara Swisher wrote a New York Times op-ed entitled: "Who Will Teach Silicon Valley to be Ethical?" In her piece she asked whether companies need a Chief Ethics Officer. I follow Kara on Twitter and I was intrigued by the responses. Many of her followers replied in the negative, suggesting that ethics must be baked into the company's culture and could not be instilled in it by a single individual, however well-intentioned.

(Mis)alignment between Culture & Values

As someone who runs a data analytics company that quantifies corporate culture and stakeholder values, I know from our tens of thousands of data sets accumulated from 146 countries, that what a company *thinks* is its culture and what is its culture are not necessarily the same. In fact, there is often misalignment between the corporation's stated values and the lived values as reflected by their employees.

Using this lens, I reflect on how we and other tech companies can create an ethical framework. Here's a set of guidelines that might be helpful as you formulate your own company's unique approach to setting values.

7 Steps for Creating an Ethical Start-Up

1. **Develop a corporate value statement.** There are lots of resources to get you started. Here're two: "190 Brilliant Company Values" and "20 Inspiration Company Core Value Examples," which calls out these note-worthy value statements in from high-profile tech companies:

   - Hubspot employees have HEART: Humble, Empathetic, Adaptable, Remarkable, Transparent"

   - Zoom: CARE for Community, Customers, Company, Teammates, Selves

   - Travelers Insurance: Honesty – Integrity – Accountability

   We've also articulated five core values and seek to not only share them with our community, but also incorporate them into the fabric of our business. We've set up a corporate charitable fund and make donations on behalf of our collective users.

2. **Bring on a trusted Advisor. :** While many Fortune 500 companies, particularly those in healthcare, energy, and financial sectors, have a Chief Ethics Officer, it's tough to find a startup with this expertise in house. We actually have an Advisor on our team with a background in the field of Ethics. Jane Levikow, our philanthropic expert, has a MA in Ethics. (Jane is also a former nun, which adds depth to her counsel.) Jane's viewpoint provides an internal check on our product development and outreach strategies.

3. **Embrace transparency:** It's no accident that the companies that are seen by consumers as the most transparent are also social impact companies. Consumer favorites such as Patagonia and Blue Bottle coffee were noted by BusinessInsider as "succeeding through transparency." We seek to demonstrate transparency by publicly sharing our scientific methodology.

4. **Get certified:** One ethical guidepost specific to companies working in big data is the recommendation that everyone who works with data receive training on the proper care and handling of personal information.
   Members of Summery's science team have passed the National Institute of Health Protecting Human Subject Research Participants (NIH PHRP) training. The NIH provides an extensive list of PHRP resources.

5. **Solicit expert opinions:** Most start-ups are fully focused on building products and traction and may not be able to see or indeed control how others might use their products in ethically-suspect ways.
   To counter potential tunnel vision, we've identified several esteemed data ethicists, located here in the U.S. and abroad, to call upon if a sensitive case presents itself.

6. **Endorse data ethics covenants:** Perhaps the easiest course to creating an ethical framework is to adopt existing ethics protocols. As few focused on the field of data ethics include:

   - [Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) Code of Ethics & Professional Conduct](#)

   - [General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) Guidelines](#)

   - [UK Parliament Code of Ethics for AI](#)

7. **Empower individuals:** By far the most important of our ethical principles is our firm belief in the importance of empowering individuals with respect to their own data. Our business model is to provide data analytics to companies that encapsulate the values of their employee cohorts (as well as other stakeholders), so we also ensure that:

   - Each individual has to opt-in to participate in our personality testing.

   - Each individual receives an overview of their own personality traits and characteristics, providing them with self-knowledge so they can chart their own corporate course.

An Evolving Ethical Framework

In her piece, Kara offers two helpful observations. First, that the tech sector faces a lot of complex problems. And second, that any one company should not set the moral path. As a founder and CEO working in this bubble, I couldn't agree more.

Which is why I'm willing to share our company's approach—which admittedly is just one model that seems to be working for our team at this particular point in time. The landscape could change at any moment, which is why we need to keep alert to adapt to future challenges.

So here at Summery we're going to hold fast to our individual ethics and corporate values and trust that the processes that we put in place will safeguard the ethical framework we adopted and help us make decisions that reflect the values of our company.

How does your organization think about ethics? Do you see your ethics represented in your workplace culture? Any good examples of companies promoting an ethical use of data? Reach me at Erin@summery.ai. I'd love to hear your thoughts.

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